

# SAPPHO

1        Rich-throned immortal Aphrodite,  
          scheming daughter of Zeus, I pray you,  
with pain and sickness, Queen, crush not my  
          heart,

          but come, if ever in the past you  
          heard my voice from afar and hearkened,  
and left your father's halls and came, with gold  
          chariot yoked; and pretty sparrows  
          brought you swiftly across the dark earth  
fluttering wings from heaven through the air.

          Soon they were here, and you, Blest Goddess,  
          smiling with your immortal features,  
asked why I'd called, what was the matter now,

          what was my heart insanelly craving:  
          'Who is it this time I must cozen  
to love you, Sappho? Who's unfair to you?

          'For though she flee, soon she'll be chasing;  
          though she refuse gifts, she'll be giving;  
though she love not, she'll love despite herself.'

          Yes, come once more, from sore obsession  
          free me; all that my heart desires  
fulfilled, fulfil—help me to victory!

2        Come, goddess, to your holy shrine,  
          where your delightful apple grove  
awaits, and altars smoke with frankincense.

          A cool brook sounds through apple boughs,  
          and all's with roses overhung;  
from shimmering leaves a trancelike sleep takes  
          hold.

          Here is a flowery meadow, too,  
          where horses graze, and gentle blow  
the breezes . . .



Here, then, Love-goddess much in mind,  
infuse our feast in gracious style  
with nectar poured in cups that turn to gold.

5 Love-goddess and Sea-nymphs, please let  
my brother reach here safe and sound,  
and all his heart's desires be fulfilled,

but let him undo all his past  
mistakes, gladden his friends and vex  
his enemies, and . . .

May he be ready to respect  
his sister, and from hurtful pains

. . . . .

15 . . . Love-goddess; may he find you harsh,  
and Doricha\* not boast again  
of how his longing's brought him back to her.

16 Some think a fleet, a troop of horse  
or soldiery the finest sight  
in all the world; but I say, what one loves.

Easy it is to make this plain  
to anyone. She the most fair  
of mortals, Helen, having a man of the best,  
deserted him, and sailed to Troy,  
without a thought for her dear child  
or parents, led astray by [love's power.]

[For though the heart be pr]oud [and strong,]  
[Love] quickly [bends it to his will. —]  
That makes me think of Anactoria.

I'd sooner see her lovely walk  
and the bright sparkling of her face  
than all the horse and arms of Lydia.

17 O lady Hera, may my prayer  
bring thy enchanting presence close,  
that Atreus' royal sons\* established here  
when they had gone through many trials,  
round Ilios first, and then at sea:  
when they came here they could not journey on



before invoking thee, and Zeus  
of Suppliants, and Thÿone's son\*  
the lovely. Now grant me thy ancient grace.

Holy and fair . . . virg . . .

22

. . . take the soft harp,  
Abanthis, sing of Gongyla;  
that yearning aura's on you once again,  
my dear. It thrilled you, didn't it,  
seeing that dress of hers? I'm glad.  
The Love-goddess herself has chided me  
for praying [for new sweethearts and  
forgetting old ones] . . .

23

. . . love . . .  
For when I see you face to face,  
I think, was even Hermione\*  
so fair? Helen herself, perhaps, if so  
a mortal may be praised. Know this:  
your kindness would be my release  
from all my brooding . . .

24

Why, we too did all that when we were young.  
Yes, lovely times we . . .

30

. . . and girls  
in nightlong celebration sing  
of you and of your flower-bosomed bride.  
So wake, and go to join your friends,  
the lads. I reckon we shall see  
less sleep than the melodious nightingale.

31

He looks to me to be in heaven,  
that man who sits across from you  
and listens near you to your soft speaking,  
your laughing lovely: that, I vow,  
makes the heart leap in my breast;  
for watching you a moment, speech fails me,  
my tongue is paralysed, at once  
a light fire runs beneath my skin,  
my eyes are blinded, and my ears drumming,



the sweat pours down me, and I shake  
all over, sallower than grass:  
I feel as if I'm not far off dying.

But no thing is too hard to bear;  
for [God can make] the poor man [rich,  
or bring to nothing heaven-high fortune.]

32 (*The Muses*)

who gave me of their craft, and so  
set me in high regard.

33 O Aphrodite, crowned in gold,  
if only I could have such luck!

34 The stars about the lovely moon  
withdraw and hide their shining forms,  
when at her full she bathes the earth in light  
. . . silver . . .

36 . . . and I yearn, and I desire . . .

39 A decorated slipper hid  
her foot, a lovely piece of Lydian work.

41 I cannot change my mind for you, my dears.

44 So the herald Idaeus arrived with the message  
swift.

' . . . glory that never fades.

Hector comes with his company, bringing from  
holy Thebes\*

and from Plakos' perennial fountain a lovely bride,  
rich Andromache, voyaging over the briny sea.

Countless bangles of gold they are bringing, and  
crimson-dyed

robes that float with the breezes, and ornaments  
finely made,

drinking-vessels of silver past number, and ivory.'

Hector's father sprang eagerly up when he heard  
the news,

word soon came to the friends of the family  
through the town:

Ilus' noble descendants\* got busy and harnessed  
mules



to their finely built carriages; all of the wives got  
in,  
all the girls with their delicate ankles, and on their  
own

Priam's daughters . . .

while the bachelors harnessed their horses to  
chariots

. . . to Ilios.

Lyres, melodious shawms, and the clatter of  
castanets

blended there, and the voices of girls in the holy  
song;

up to heaven the glorious clamour arose . . .

Everywhere in the streets there were bowls full of  
wine, and cups,

myrrh and cassia, frankincense, fragrances all  
pell-mell.

All the women of matronly age shouted Eleleu!

while the men singing out in the beautiful

Steepscale Hymn

called on Paeon, the god of the excellent bow and  
lyre,

praising Hector the prince and Andromache his  
princess.

44A Phoebus golden of hair, whom the daughter of  
Koios\* bore

after union with Zeus son of Kronos, whose name  
is great.

In Zeus' presence then Artemis swore with the  
gods' great oath:

'By thy head, I will keep myself virgin for evermore,  
roaming free in the heights of the mountains, the  
lonely peaks.

Nod now, grant me this favour!' she said, and the  
blessed gods'

father nodded, confirming it. Therefore do gods  
and men

call her virgin and deersooter, goddess of all the  
wild;

noble titles; and Eros can never go near to her . . .



- 46 . . . while I  
on soft cushions will spread . . .
- 47 Love  
shakes my heart like the wind rushing down on  
the mountain oaks.
- 48 You came, and I needed you,  
and you cooled the fever of longing that racked my  
heart.
- 49 Love? Why, I was in love with you, Atthis, a long  
time back.  
Just a plain little girl to my eyes, but . . .
- 50 For the beautiful person is beautiful just in form,  
but the noble of soul will soon seem to have  
beauty too.
- 51 I'm uncertain now what I should do; I am in two  
minds.
- 52 I don't reckon to reach to the sky.
- 53 Holy spirits of Joy, rosy of arm, daughters of Zeus,  
come nigh.
- 54 Eros, coming from heaven wrapped in a crimson  
cloak.
- 55 (*To a wealthy but unmusical lady*)  
Yes, and when you are dead, there you will lie for  
aye  
unremembered, because none of Pieria's  
roses\* touch you, but unnoticed in Hades too  
you will hover among faded forgotten ghosts.
- 56 As to musical skill, never, I think, again  
shall we see such a girl born to the light of day.
- 57 (*To Andromeda*)  
Who's this country colleen casting a spell on you,  
one who hasn't yet learned how to arrange her  
shift  
well down over her calves?
- 58 . . . young girls . . .  
. . . deep-bosomed Muses' lovely gifts  
. . . clear melodious lyre.



But as for me, old age has got my whole  
body, my hair is white that once was dark.

. . . my knees will not hold up

. . . to dance like the young fawns

. . . but what can I do?

To stay untouched by age, that cannot be:  
a lesson, so they say, the goddess Dawn  
learned, when in her rose arms she bore Tithonus  
off to the world's east limit; still old age  
caught up with him . . . his immortal bride.

. . . . .

My liking's for the gracious. Thus does love  
define my sunlight and my beautiful.

81 So set beautiful wreaths, Dika, about your tresses,  
plait together the dill shoots with your tender  
fingers.

Primed with flowers, the blest spirits of Joy most  
favour

such occasions: they shun people who wear no  
garlands.

82 Mnasidika is shapelier  
than tender Gyrinno.

94

. . . . .

Honestly, I wish I were dead.  
She was covered in tears as she went away,  
left me, saying 'Oh, it's too bad!  
How unlucky we are! I swear,  
Sappho, I don't want to be leaving you.'

This is what I replied to her:  
'Go, be happy, and think of me.  
You remember how we looked after you;  
or if not, then let me remind

. . . . .

all the lovely and beautiful times we had,  
all the garlands of violets  
and of roses and . . .  
and . . . that you've put on in my company,



all the delicate chains of flowers  
that encircled your tender neck

. . . . .  
. . . . .

and the costly unguent with which  
you anointed yourself, and the royal myrrh.

On soft couches . . .

tender . . .

you assuaged your longing . . .

There was never a . . .

or a shrine or a . . .

. . . that we were not present at,

no grove . . . no festive dance . . .

95 I said 'Master, . . .

For by the blest lady . . .

I take no joy in walking under heaven,

but feel a strange desire to die

and see the dewy lotus-banks

of Acheron . . .'

96 . . . she worshipped you

and always in your singing she most delighted.

But now among the women of Lydia

she shines, as after the sun has set

the rosy-fingered moon will appear, surpassing

all the stars, bestowing her light alike

upon the waves of the briny sea

and on the fields that sparkle with countless  
flowers.

Everything is bathed in the lovely dew:

roses take their nourishment, and

soft chervil, and the blossoming honey-lotus.

Often, as she moves on her daily round,

she'll be eating her tender heart

when she thinks of her love for gentle Atthis.

And for us to go there . . .

. . . it's not possible . . .

with the wedding-song(?) ringing loud between us.



For us to match the beauty of goddesses  
is not easy . . .

98 (*To Sappho's daughter Cleïs*)

Why now, Cleïs your grandmother used to say  
that when *she* was young, if they had  
crimson ribbons to bind their hair,  
that was quite an exceptional ornament.

But when someone has hair like yours  
flaming brighter than any torch,  
then it's very much nicer to have it so,  
neatly garlanded with some fresh  
blooming flowers. But as for these  
broidered headbands, it's only just recently  
that they've brought them from Sardis here  
to the towns of Ionia

. . . . .

But I haven't the means to buy  
such a headband for you, my dear.  
Be content with our own Mytilenian . . .

99a . . . of Polyanax's line  
. . . Samian . . .

to strum across  
the plectrum-welcoming strings . . .

. . . kindly  
. . . and it vibrates harmoniously,

[while her fair v]oice  
through the h[igh notes . . .

99b O son of Zeus and Leto,\*  
come to the ceremony . . .  
leave Gryneia's woods  
and thy famed oracle

. . . . .

. . . . .

. . . . .

Again, it's the wild son  
of Polyanax's line I want to expose.



101 (*To Aphrodite*)

kerchieves and crimson-dyed  
aprons that float with the breeze  
. . . sent from Phocaea,  
precious gifts . . .

102 Darling mother, I can no longer ply my loom:  
I'm overcome with longing for a slender lad.

104ab Hesperus, loveliest of all the stars . . .  
bringing back all that glowing Dawn sent forth:  
you bring the sheep,  
you bring the goat,  
you bring the girl to a home away from her mother.

105a (*On a girl*)

Like the sweet-apple that's gleaming red on the  
topmost bough,  
right at the very end, that the apple-pickers forgot,  
or rather didn't forget, but were just unable to  
reach.

105b Like the hyacinth on the hills that the passing  
shepherds  
trample under their feet, and the purple bloom on  
the ground . . .

106 supreme, like the singer from Lesbos performing  
abroad.

107 I still do cleave to maidenhood.

108 (*To a bride*)

O you beauty, you charmer . . .

109 'We'll give her', says the father.

110 The doorman's feet\* are size 90:  
five cowhides went into his sandals,  
and it took ten cobblers to make them!

111 High must be the chamber—

Hymenaeum!

Make it high, you builders!

A bridegroom's coming—

Hymenaeum!

like the War-god himself, the tallest of the tall!



112 Happy groom, the union you prayed for  
is now fulfilled, you have the girl of your prayers.  
How handsome you are, with your gentle eyes,  
and your lovely face all radiant with desire.  
The Love-goddess has shown you special  
favour.

113 No other girl now, dear groom, like her . . .

114 'Maidenhood, my maidenhood,  
where are you going now?'

'I'll visit you no more, my dear,  
I'll visit you no more.'

115 To what, dear groom, can I best liken you?  
To a slender sapling I most liken you.

116 Hail to the bride, all hail the honoured groom!

117 Good wishes, bride! Good wishes to the groom!

118 Come, noble lyre, take voice  
and tell me . . .

120 But I am not the resentful sort.  
I have a placid heart.

121 No, be our friend, but take  
a younger woman for your bed.  
At my age I can't bring myself  
to live with you.

122 I saw her picking flowers,  
a girl exceeding tender . . .

123 Gold-sandalled Dawn has just . . .

126 Sleeping on her tender companion's bosom.

127 Muses, once more come nigh,  
leave the gold halls of Zeus.

128 Come now, gracious spirits of Joy  
and Muses with lovely hair.

129a And you have no thought of me.

129b Or you love some other person more than me.

130 Once more I feel the sting of crippling Love,  
that bittersweet, unmanageable midge.

. . . . .



Atthis, you've come to hate the thought of me,  
you fly to join Andromeda.

132 I have a pretty child, like flowers  
of gold her form, my precious Cleïs;  
whom I would not exchange  
for all of Lydia, or the lovely land . . .

133 Andromeda is well repaid.

Sappho, why do you . . . Aphrodite  
who holds all fortune in her hands?

134 I dreamed I spoke with the Cyprian goddess.\*

135 Why must the swallow wake me so soon, Eirana?

136 The nightingale that brings the news of spring  
with lovely voice.

137 (He) 'There's something I want to say to you,  
but I'm too shy . . . '

(She) 'But if you wanted something good,  
your tongue not brewing wicked words,  
you'd not be shy, you'd speak as you saw fit.'

138 Stand facing me, dear man,  
and let the beauty of your eyes shine out.

140 'Aphrodite, tender Adonis  
is dying!\* What can we do?'

'You must beat your breasts, o maidens,  
you must tear your tunics too.'

141 There stood a bowl  
of ambrosia mixed,  
and Hermes took a jug and served the gods.

Then they all poured  
libations from  
their goblets, praying blessings on the groom.

142 Leto and Niobe\* were the best of friends.

166 They say that Leda once did find an egg\*  
well covered in a clump of hyacinth.

143 And chick-peas grew there golden on the banks.

146 I'll do without the honey, and the stings.



- 147 I'm sure that people will remember us.
- 148 Wealth without class is no safe house-guest.
- 150 (*To her daughter*)  
In a house of the Muses' servants it's not right  
for there to be lament . . . it would not befit us.
- 154 The moon was shining full; about  
the altar they took their stand.
- 155 To the daughter of Polyanax's house  
most courteous greeting.
- 156 (she) more melodious than a harp,  
more gold than gold.
- 158 When anger's spreading through your breast,  
it's best to keep your yapping tongue in check.
- 160 Of these things I now  
make lovely song for pleasure of my friends.



## Sappho

15 *Doricha*: a courtesan in the Greek colony of Naucratis in Egypt. Sappho's brother Charaxus, a trader, had become expensively involved with her. Fragments 5 and 15 may come from the same poem.

17 *Atreus' royal sons*: Agamemnon and Menelaus, according to Lesbian legend, established the local cult of the three deities mentioned in this poem on their way home from Troy.

*Thyone's son*: Dionysus.

23 *Hermione*: the daughter of Helen.

44 *Thebes*: not the city of Oedipus, but a town in the Troad.

*Ilus' noble descendants*: the Trojans, Ilus being the eponymous hero of Ilios.

44A *the daughter of Koios*: Leto. Koios was one of the Titans, a brother of Kronos.

55 *Pieria's roses*: Pieria, north of Mount Olympus, was famed as the birthplace of the Muses.

99b *son of Zeus and Leto*: Apollo.

110 *The doorman's feet*: the doorman is guarding the chamber where a newly wed couple have retired. The bride's friends outside, in merry mood, make fun of him.

134 *the Cyprian goddess*: Aphrodite.

140 *Adonis is dying*: Adonis, whose name came from the Phoenician 'adôn ('Lord'), was one form of the Near Eastern god who was the goddess of love's lover and who died and was mourned annually. This is the earliest mention of his cult in Greece. It was popular especially with women. The song is for some kind of ritual play in which Adonis' death was enacted.

142 *Niobe*: this woman was unwise enough to boast that she had



borne far more children than Leto, who had only two. But those two were Apollo and Artemis, the gods with the power of life and death over boys and girls, and they killed all of Niobe's sons and daughters.

166 *an egg*: no doubt the one from which Helen was reputed to have been born. In the usual version this was the result of Zeus' taking the form of a swan to seduce Leda.